



ESRI Research Bulletin

Smoking Outside: the Effect of the Irish Workplace Smoking Ban on Smoking Prevalence among the Employed

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INTRODUCTION

Does forcing workers to go outside to smoke reduce smoking? In March 2004, the Tobacco Smoking (Prohibition) Regulations 2003 were implemented in Ireland. The introduction of these regulations meant that Ireland became the first country in the world to introduce a nationwide workplace smoking ban. With a small number of exceptions, smoking was prohibited in all Irish indoor workplaces, with employers being fined for non-compliance. This research measured the effect of the ban on smoking.

The primary aim was to reduce people's exposure to second-hand smoke and a 95% compliance rate among employers suggests this was achieved. By prohibiting smoking in the majority of indoor working places, the ban also made it more difficult for workers to smoke, effectively increasing the non-monetary cost of smoking. This research examines whether this extra non-monetary cost reduced smoking among the employed, by comparing smoking among workers and non-workers before and after the introduction of the ban. If the ban increased the non-monetary cost of smoking for employed individuals more than it did for non-employed individuals, we would expect to see a larger decrease in smoking among the employed than among the non-employed, controlling for other factors.

THE DATA

We used two waves (2002 and 2007) of the Survey of Lifestyle, Attitudes & Nutrition (SLÁN) for the main body of research in the paper. This dataset provided a sample of the population in Ireland before and after the introduction of the 2004 smoking ban. The data recorded key characteristics for the analysis, namely smoking status and employment status, as well as control variables such

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as age, sex, income, etc. Workers were classified as non-smokers, occasional smokers or regular smokers. Sufficient time passed between the collection of the data and the introduction of the smoking ban to ensure that we could measure the long term impact of the smoking ban.

RESULTS

With the National Tobacco Control Office reporting a 95% compliance rate among employers with the workplace smoking ban, the primary aim of reducing the risk of passive smoking in the workplace was achieved. However, in terms of smoking itself, the research finds that the workplace smoking ban did not result in a greater reduction in smoking among the employed population compared with the non-working population. In fact, the evidence suggests a significantly larger decrease in smoking among non-workers relative to the employed. This pattern was found to be particularly strong for occasional smokers.

Possible explanations for the relative change in smoking behaviour between the employed and non-employed from 2002 to 2007 include changes in the real price of cigarettes and changes in risk aversion. A fall in the real price of cigarettes from 2002 to 2007 seems to be the most likely explanation for the patterns. Cigarette prices rose more slowly than prices of other goods at a time when the incomes of working people were rising. A change in risk aversion among the employed may also explain some of the pattern observed. Ireland was enjoying an economic boom in 2004, so it is possible that workers whose earnings increased became more likely to engage in risky activities, such as smoking. This is an area that requires further study.

Because of data constraints, we were unable to examine changes in the precise number of cigarettes smoked by individuals before and after the introduction of the workplace smoking ban, a subject, which may provide further evidence on the impact of the ban.